A third of the countryside is recognised to be under the permanent control of the Vietcong, day and night. But nearly all the rest is in fact no more than "secure by day"—which is obviously a very relative kind of security. The government in Saigon can have little or no influence with peasants and villagers so badly exposed to intimidation and reprisal.

In short, most of South Vietnam seems to be already lost. Only five million people out of a population of 14 million live in areas that can reasonably be classed as permanently secure. Almost all are town dwellers. One Vietnamese minister compared the Saigon government's position with that of General de Gaulle when he began his fight back from London in 1940. For the Americans, the multi-billion-dollar question is whether the South Vietnamese who do not want to be communist can discover in themselves at this late hour the will to fight their way back. In the end no one else can hold their country for them.

What do the Vietnamese want?

No one can say with authority what "the South Vietnamese" want. The only general elections held since the French left in 1954 were those under Diem, which were rigged. It can safely be assumed that most South Vietnamese want to be free of foreign interference (fierce resistance to it is a constant in their history) and also that most of them would appreciate peace. Should the United States withdraw, and exchange the prospect of an indefinitely protracted, horrible war for the chance of seeing a united communist Vietnam under Hanoi detach itself sooner or later from Peking's influence and strike an independent Titoist line? It is a case that is easier to argue in Europe or America than on the ground in Vietnam.

The lack of serious anti-American feeling in Saigon is a constant surprise to visitors, considering how the American presence sprawls, often unattractively, across the whole heart of the town. A survey of the known attitudes of the factions that dominate South Vietnam gives the following result: the 1½ million Catholics, many of whom left the north to escape Hanoi's rule in 1954, are implacably opposed to the communists and want the Americans to help fight them; so do the 1½ million followers of the Hoa Hao sect, whose determination to be independent (although their desire is to be free Hoa Hao rather than free South Vietnamese) has made their home provinces near the Cambodian border the most secure area in the whole country outside the towns; the 2 million Cao Dai also want to run their own affairs free from Vietcong domination.

The country's remaining 8 million inhabitants are claimed as Buddhists by the bonzes (as the monks are called), who certainly command their respect, although ancestor-worship is the dominant religious principle. Most of these people live in the Mekong Delta south of Saigon.

The northern Buddhists have spoken often enough of negotiations and peace to attract the label of dangerous neutralists. But no one is sure what their leaders really want (their leaders give every sign of not having thought their ideas through themselves). What they say they want is to lead a broadly-based popular movement strong enough to resist the Vietcong in the villages. They believe, apparently, that a general election would allow them to establish a government that would provide a road to peace, because it would eventually become strong enough to negotiate with the Vietcong on equal terms. They say this might be in three years' time. In the meantime, they say they want the Americans to stay and help them fight the war.

The above may appear an artificial way of assessing Vietnamese opinion to those who believe that the Vietcong have quite simply won the countryside, and that the peasants must necessarily regard the Americans and their napalm as the number one enemy. Again, things do not appear so simple in reality. The systematic and ruthless way in which the Vietcong have used murder to secure domination of the villages is well documented, and every day the soldiers in the field come across sickening evidence that the terrorism goes on: disembowelled women and children, murdered men. Morally, the American tactical bombing aimed at Vietcong units is hardly comparable with this terrorism.

The fact that the American presence appears to have the approval of the people they are trying to help does not, however, mean that there is a united South Vietnamese will to beat the Vietcong, or to do anything else. The Buddhists and the Catholics distrust each other intensely; the southern Buddhists distrust the northerners, whom they suspect of wanting to set up an autonomous, neutralist state in central Vietnam; the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai want to go their own way. It seems clear that if the Americans left, South Vietnam would not have the political substance to survive for a month. There are signs of improvement in the past year, but again not enough for optimism. This means that the Americans may be left holding the baby indefinitely.

Which way back?

There are at least three American views in Saigon of how to escape. In one, military power, escalation and deterrence predominate, giving the hope of a more or less quick solution. Some American officials in Saigon, while they have been left with no illusions about Marshal Ky's political qualities and acceptability to the Vietnamese people, feel that this is not the time to encourage the necessarily slow and messy process of creating representative government institutions. Unfortunately, helping Marshal Ky to stay in power from month to month could mean helping him to frustrate indefinitely the process of political development. The government is working seriously on the preparations for the elections, but Marshal Ky's frequent declarations about how long he means to retain power do not improve the atmosphere. A serious Buddhist boycott of the elections would be a disaster.

Of course, the Americans do not control the Saigon government—as has been demonstrated all too often since 1954. Presumably, no government could survive if they withdrew their support; but the Diem epoch showed just how hard it is to exercise this kind of negative power in positive ways. On the other hand, they *are* involved directly in the administration of the country, and have a capacity to run a number of things themselves with little reference to Saigon. So a clear view of what they are after would help. The evidence in South Vietnam does suggest some serious confusion.

[illegible] appears to be to allow the Vietnamese political power play—the struggle between taking at most a moderating role; and meanwhile to set about building political Vietnam *ex novo*, largely with American means and with limited reference to Saigon. The alternative political strategy of founding South Vietnam on the rock of the only native organising principle that has emerged there—religion—has apparently been set aside for the time being, even though many people in Saigon still think it offers the best, if not, indeed, the only, chance of success. Instead, the word that is being handed down from Ambassador Lodge's office, and that emanates by implication from General Lansdale's private nation-building operation, is that a new "pragmatic" breed of politicians must be summoned forth from Vietnam's womb. Pragmatic, being interpreted, means "more like us": men who, instead of feeling Buddhist or Hoa Hao or Catholic, will think of themselves as South Vietnamese, and work wholeheartedly for the common good rather than for private or family advancement. There are such men in Vietnam, but not many yet.

The Lansdale operation

General Lansdale, who earned his place in south-east Asian history 15 years ago by building up Magsaysay as a national leader to defeat the Huks in the Philippines, is now on his second tour of duty in Vietnam, having been asked personally by Mr Cabot Lodge to come and help. Surrounded by his special aura of secrecy, he [illegible] Brigadier Thang, the South Vietnamese minister for revolutionary development, who is turning